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AUTHOR Vallin, Marlene Boyd
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ABSTRACT

Teaching the basic course in speech communication can be challenging in many ways. A class debate revitalizes the course, while offering an excellent means for evaluating learning at the end of a semester course. Proficient use of interpersonal skills is necessary to organize group members and control group discussion; sufficient knowledge of persuasion is needed to prepare an effective argument; adequate delivery skills are required to present each position; and acute listening skills are demanded for a decent counterargument. From the first step to the last, students must apply what they have learned about research and time management. This project results in a greater appreciation of reasoned discourse, since students experience first hand the fact that effective communication skills can enable constructive management of conflict. The class debate project near the end of the course can be very helpful to both the teacher and students of the basic course. (MM)

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THE CLASS DEBATE: A PROJECT TO REVITALIZE THE BASIC COURSE

Submitted by: MARLENE BOYD VALLIN, Ph.D.
PENN STATE-BERKS
P.O. BOX 7009
TULPEHOCKEN ROAD
READING, PA 19610-6009
(215)320-4842 (Office)
(215)378-0454 (Home)

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Marlene Boyd Vallin

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This project offers an opportunity for teachers of the basic course to revitalize the student participation in their classrooms. It offers a challenge for class members to use all that they have learned about communication and making speeches toward the presentation of a two-hour debate. This is an exercise in group problem-solving skills, research skills, organizational skills, time management skills, and skills in preparing and presenting a persuasive speech.

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THE CLASS DEBATE: A PROJECT TO REVITALIZE THE BASIC COURSE

Teaching the basic course in speech communication can be challenging indeed! We instructors know the importance of acquiring effective communication skills, but how do we make our students realize this? Most of us teach in schools where the basic course, generally public speaking, is a requirement for graduation. We tend to agree that this prerequisite is good in that it demonstrates that institutions of higher education recognize the significance of our curriculum. However, we also realize that it is not so good because it seems to foster negative sentiments in some students. They perceive the basic course as a "have-to-do" rather than a "want-to-do." Reversing that attitude is our most difficult task. Another challenge faced by instructors of the basic course is that presented by time constraints. For most students the basic course will be their only opportunity to study speech communication. We teachers know that there is much that they need to know, need to practice. We are often posed with the problem of whether we are doing an adequate job: To what degree have our students grasped the principles we have been presenting?

The project which I discuss in this article can help instructors meet these challenges. While stimulating enthusiasm, it offers an excellent means for evaluating learning.

RATIONALE

The mere mention of the word "debate" tends to stimulate interest. People like to witness the confrontation of adversaries. Think of the present popularity of professional sports and the television "talk show." Consider the ongoing disputes between politicians and the media, labor and management. Differences of opinion have

existed as long as humans have. The bases of all plots, real and fictional, are constructed on conflict. Such differences keep us reading literature, going to movies, watching soap operas. Our adrenalin flows at the very notion of adversity. It seems to be human nature.

For the past three years, the class debate has been offered to my students as an option for the final speech. The response was overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Students tend to identify quickly with the idea: "We did this in high school!" "I saw the presidential hopefuls debate last week!" "Isn't that like what happens on Perry Mason?" They also see this project as an opportunity to share the burden of responsibility, thus relieving their workload at the time during the semester when academic demands seem most oppressive. Also, the interest associated with this choice indicates the need to relieve the tedium which "another round of speeches" tends to create--for the teacher as well as the student.

Proposing this project at the end of the semester has proved not only to revitalize class interest, but also to be a very efficient means of course evaluation. The problem posed by this assignment creates situations to which the students need to apply all that they have learned about communication. Proficient use of interpersonal skills is necessary to organize group members and control group discussion, sufficient knowledge of persuasion is needed to prepare an effective argument, adequate delivery skills are required to present each position, and acute listening skills are demanded for a decent counterargument. From the first step to the last, the students must apply what they learned about research and time management. This project also offers a bonus for the basic course student. It makes the participants more aware of the structure of a constructive argument. They witness the use of argumentation as a means of discovering "truth." This project results in a greater appreciation of reasoned discourse. The students experience at first hand the fact that effective communication skills can enable the constructive

management of conflict. Indeed, the class debate project can be very helpful to the teacher and student of the basic course.

PROCEDURE

Preparing for the Project

Four weeks before the end of the course, the students are presented with this option via a handout. It explains that for this twenty-four member, fifty-minute period class, there can be one debate using all members or two group debates. The time allotted for the single debate is two class periods: one fifty-minute time slot to introduce and present the arguments on both sides, affirmative and negative, which are restricted to twenty-minutes each, and the other period to conduct two ten-minute rebuttals and two five-minute speeches of summation. When the class cannot agree on a single resolution, two separate debating groups have been allowed. Since their number of members is smaller, and class time is limited, each has one class period: fifteen-minutes for each side to introduce and present each argument, five minutes each for the rebuttal, and three minutes each for the speeches of summation. The single class debate tends to be the more popular and, for greater unity and challenge, preferred by this instructor.

The handout also includes an outline of the structure of the presentation. The class is informed that this debate, except for the rebuttal, follows the form of a speech of persuasion, and, therefore, should be organized accordingly. That is, the Introduction should be in two parts,--the psychological step and logical step. Included in this first segment should be an attention-getter, an identifying factor, and a statement of significance of the topic and its relevance to the total audience. The second half of the Introduction should include a clear statement of the

resolution and a clarification of all terms. To clarify the objectives for both sides, at the outset of the planning period the definitions of important terms in the resolution are agreed upon by both sides. The Body should follow an appropriate organizational pattern. The need for important, irrefutable evidence is underscored. The students are reminded to consult the various forms of support which they were taught in class: definitions, descriptions, analogies, anecdotes, examples, quantification and statistics, quotations and testimony, and visual aids. They are encouraged to consider both sides of the argument, avoiding weak and out-of-date material, yet noting possible counterarguments. They are motivated to use their research skills not only to support their side, but also to second guess their opponents, which will serve to strengthen their case in both the statement of the argument and the rebuttal. Members of both sides are cautioned to watch for fallacious reasoning. This can be fine fodder for an alert rebuttal team. The conclusion of the argument should be a short summary, including a clear restatement of their viewpoint of the resolution (thesis). Proof of knowing how to construct the Conclusion is expected to be demonstrated in the final part of the debate, the five-minute speech of summation.

The rebuttal is explained as the counterargument. The members assigned to this part of the debate are allowed to take notes during the presentation of the argument. Both sides must agree to the use of tape recorders. These individuals are advised to attack the argument of the other side constructively. They are reminded that no new material may be introduced in this segment.

The speech of summation should follow the form of an appropriate conclusion for a speech: the main points should be summarized, the resolution (thesis) should be restated, the appeals and tone reemphasized, and the speech should end with some form of memorable statement.

After the class has decided to do the debate, the members are asked to bring in suggestions for the subject, phrased in the form of a resolution: "Resolved, That . . ." Subjects that work for debates are those propositions of fact, policy, and value which tend to present arguments which are not readily remedied. These controversial positions should be timely and of concern to the class.

Implementing the Project

At the next class meeting, the teacher, using a problem-solving agenda which she makes clear to her students, conducts discussion on defining the problem: What resolution is preferred by the majority? Students nominate and argue for their choice. After a vote decides the resolution, the class is divided into two groups, the affirmative and negative teams. The students are now moved to analyze their problem: Given the constraints of time and numbers of members, how can we present the more successful argument? The teacher helps by recommending that the team be broken up into subgroups according to the outline of the presentation. These subgroups should act like miniteams, working on their particular goal. It is important to inform each member that s/he must be a team member first, that the goal of the team is the most important concern. The fact that the team grade will be their individual grade is a very effective form of external motivation.

After a review of the remainder of the steps for problem-solving, the canons of rhetoric, the persuasive appeals of ethos, logos, and pathos, and such motivational appeals as those presented by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the teams are given two periods of class time to function on their own. The instructor becomes a resource person whom the member may consult whenever necessary.

At this point, it is necessary to make clear that it is the finished presentation that will be evaluated. Therefore, the teams must allow time for

sufficient rehearsal. The techniques which make for the most effective delivery should be evident. A copy of the evaluation sheet which the instructor, as judge, will use is given to each team. It displays the criteria for evaluation, including quality of preparation, evidence of teamwork, and overall effectiveness, and a grid for ranking excellent (5) to poor (1), with a space for comments. The remaining space is used for the instructor's comments on the contributions of the individual members. If a student performs especially well, the instructor may note a mark of excellence.

Presenting the Project

The day of the debate tends to be filled with a sense of formal excitement and secrecy. Team members wearing their best business attire usually arrive in a body, early. After last-minute pep talks, they are seated in the order of their presentations. This is the moment they have been waiting for--their opportunity to "right the world"--and they are ready. To add to the special quality of this occasion, and as an effort to enhance the mood, I recommend holding the debate at a location other than the classroom, preferably some place more formal.

Right before the beginning of class, a coin toss is held. The winner has the choice of deciding when to present its argument. The team that presents its argument first, delivers its rebuttal second, and so forth. Like race horses waiting at the gate, the members, offering each other signs of unity and strength, ready themselves.

At the hour to begin, I welcome the students, greet any and all visitors, and, in stentorian tones, declare the nature of the business at hand. Retiring to the back of the room I set my stop watch to signal the beginning of the argument.

The atmosphere promoted by this match of words and wit rivals that of athletics. On the faces of each team member can be seen that strong sense of solidarity. Their rooting, though silent, is just as significant. Minutes are watched while rebuttal teams record. And when time is called, there is a sign of relief like that heard from a job well done.

At the end of the first session, the teams collect in private to prepare their rebuttal teams. These teams have one day in which to prepare their counterarguments.

The last day of the debate witnesses the same convention, the same atmosphere. The instructor announces the time restriction of ten minutes for each rebuttal presentation. Generally, two to three members on each team speak. After both counterarguments have concluded, the debate is brought to a dramatic conclusion with the speeches of summation. The presentation of this segment is usually made by one or two of each team's best public speakers. The aim of this speech is like that of a trial attorney's--to convince the judge that the team's position on the resolution in question is truer. Following the form of the conclusion to a speech, in the five minutes allowed for each, the speaker summarizes the major points of his team's argument, reemphasizes the appeals, restates the thesis (The affirmative or negative viewpoint of the resolution.) and leaves his audience with a memorable statement.

CONCLUSION

This assignment has had very positive results. As a matter of fact, many of my students listed the debate under what they liked on the end-of-the-semester course evaluation sheets. For the students, the benefits have been many. In addition to experiencing a renewed interest in the course and alleviating their academic load, they made new friends. They learned to work well with others, formulating goals and reinforcing problem-solving skills. They recognized the value of working in groups,

that groups tend to produce more solutions to a problem than individuals working alone. They learned to appreciate argumentation as a method for discovering truth. Speaking on behalf of others showed them that they had the ability and the talent to speak with more self confidence and credibility. In addition to improving their speaking technique, they honed all the skills necessary for effective communication--critical thinking, active listening, clear and concrete writing. The study of rhetoric became more real for them--more useful, more practical. How has this project benefitted the instructor? Of course, the fact that this project effected such positive results on the students was enough reward. Further satisfaction from this experience came from the fact that it proved my conviction that the basic course in speech communication is a very vital study. This project showed me that the opportunity for the instructor to effect positive change is possible, and with an attractive motivational device such as this project, it is highly probable.